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SUBJECT: LEBANON'S METN BY-ELECTIONS: DID EVERYONE LOSE  
(EXCEPT POSSIBLY GOL)?

REF: BEIRUT 1184

Classified By: Jeffrey Feltman, Ambassador, per 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) While the pro-independence March 14 majority and the Hizballah-Aoun opposition each picked up one seat in the parliamentary by-elections held 8/5 (reftel), the Hizballah-Aoun forces claim the bigger victory: before the two assassinations (of Pierre Gemayel and Walid Eido) that created the vacancies, both seats were solidly with March 14.

Now only one is. At a superficial level, this result proves that assassins can indeed change the composition of Lebanon's parliament by a combination of murder and democracy. The March 14 majority in the 128-seat house is now that much narrower, with the Metn seat once held by Pierre Gemayel newly filled by Camille Khoury of the Aoun bloc. As a result, the Baabda-Aley MPs on Walid Jumblatt's parliamentary list fear for their lives, believing themselves to be next on the hit list: they won their seats in 2005 in part because of Jumblatt's electoral cooperation with Hizballah. Today, if their seats were suddenly vacated, pro-Syrian candidates from the Talal Arslan-Hizballah-Michel Aoun alliance might prevail.

¶2. (C) But the single-seat change in the composition of the parliament is only one of the outcomes of yesterday's by-elections. We would argue that is it not even the most significant. We recommend finding public and private ways to underscore repeatedly that these elections were first and foremost a victory for the Lebanese people and the GOL: despite having a significant emotional (as Pierre Gemayel was a minister in Siniora's cabinet) and political stake in these elections, the GOL conducted free, transparent, credible, and secure elections. Even though in the Metn the margin of victory for Aoun's candidate was only 0.4 percent of the vote, or 418 votes, the GOL did not attempt to manipulate the results or call for recounts. Results were announced promptly, professionally, and without controversy. We doubt that a Hizballah or Syrian-dominated government would have been so honest. To capitalize on what can be, if we are active, a positive PR message, we should find the occasion to remind the media that the GOL proved itself credible and competent, not the "monopolizer of power" described by Michel Aoun and Hizballah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah.

¶3. (C) The GOL can also claim victory in that the opposition forces of Aoun and Hizballah participated in the elections, with Aoun going into his trademark rants to compete particularly vigorously. This participation implicitly recognizes the validity of the government's decrees organizing the elections, chipping away at the

long-standing Hizballah-Aounist rhetoric that the Siniora cabinet is illegitimate. We should make the most of this contradiction: Aoun and Hizballah cannot pick and choose when, and when not, the Siniora cabinet is legitimate. This, too, is a point we suggest that we make to the media repeatedly, to underscore that these elections reaffirmed the constitutional legitimacy of the Siniora cabinet by even Michel Aoun and Hizballah. We hope that Washington officials will help get this important story out, that what on the surface appeared to be a loss of one seat for March 14 was in fact more than compensated for by the recognition General Aoun gave to the Siniora cabinet by participating and by the proof of the Siniora cabinet's honesty and competence even when the Metn results were not in its favor.

14. (C) Beyond the GOL (and, more broadly, the people of Lebanon, who had an unusually free election in the Metn), there were not many victors in the Metn by-elections. Michel Aoun, despite winning another seat for his bloc, was stripped bare of his ability to claim to be the overwhelming Christian leader of Lebanon and thus presumptive president: when taken on their own, the Metn's Maronite voters came out 60-40 in favor of former President Amine Gemayel rather than Aoun's candidate. Given the general dislike of Gemayel, much of this 60 percent is recognized as actually anti-Aoun votes. By contrast, in the 2005 parliamentary elections, Aoun claimed 75 percent of the Metn's Maronite votes. Even for one with as loose a grip on reality as the megalomaniac Michel Aoun sometimes seems to have, it is hard to argue that one is the only deserving Maronite candidate for Lebanon's presidency when one has lost the Maronite vote in Lebanon's Maronite Christian heartland. It is far too early to write off Aoun's candidacy, but he ended the Metn elections weaker

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than as he entered them. Amine Gemayel, of course, is also weakened, and his presidential hopes diminished. But his March 14 allies are comforting him by noting that he provided a real service to Lebanon in his success in destroying the myth of Aoun's invincibility on the Christian street. This, too, is a theme we recommend emphasizing to the media: that, in the aftermath of the Metn elections, it is clear that Lebanon's presidential elections will be a multi-candidate race.

15. (C) Another loser in these elections was Maronite Patriarch Sfeir. Basically, no one heeded the Patriarch's words. First the Patriarch tried to persuade Michel Aoun not to field a candidate. Then he tried to broker a compromise by which both candidates would withdraw in favor of some kind of consensus later. Finally he tried to tip the Christian balance toward Gemayel, given the long-standing Lebanese tradition that family members typically were able to fill the rest of the parliamentary terms of deceased relatives. All of the Patriarch's words were in vain. This does not bode well for presidential elections: the Patriarch will probably be reluctant to go out on a limb again and risk weakening his authority by issuing proclamations then disregarded by his quibbling flock. And even if the Patriarch can be persuaded to play an active role, there is no guarantee the Christians will listen more closely the next time. The Patriarch's cherished dream of Christian unity seems further away than ever in the aftermath of the Metn elections.

16. (C) And what of the father-and-son Murr political machine? Father Michel (the MP) and son Elias (Deputy Prime Minister and Defense Minister) claim to have cleverly split the Greek Orthodox Metn voters, with two-thirds toward Aoun's candidate and one-third toward Gemayel. Elias says that this proves the prowess of the Murr political machine. Yet many observers tell us that the Murrs are trying to put a positive spin on what was, in fact, a significant defeat for them. In 2005 parliamentary elections, Michel Murr was primarily responsible for seeing that 75 percent of the Metn Orthodox votes went to Michel Aoun's list. In yesterday's vote, only 54 percent went for Khoury. While Elias explains the drop by

saying he personally intervened to see that some of the Orthodox gave Gemayel the chance to win, this strikes many of our contacts as improbable: Michel, not Elias, calls the Murr political shots for now.

17. (C) The Armenian Tachnaq party ostensibly came out ahead, working in solidarity to tip the elections in Khoury's favor, thus complying with their alliance with Aoun. But even this is a victory that could backfire. The Maronites today are using bitter, even racist language about the Armenians of the sort that polite Lebanese company usually reserves for the Palestinians. Tachnaq leaders no doubt thought that, by flexing its muscles so strongly for Aoun's candidate, they force the March 14 alliance (which has its own Armenian partners, considerably weaker than the Tachnaq) to take Tachnaq seriously. But, in fact, they may have weakened their own well-established place in the political hierarchy, which is usually based on siding with whomever is president of Lebanon. The closer Lebanon's next president is to March 14, the more that Tachnaq may regret its overwhelming support for Aoun's candidate now.

18. (C) Finally, we note one odd rumor circulating about the Metn elections. Many political observers, noting Parliament Speaker Berri's ambiguous silence on these by-elections, assume that Berri will forbid the two new MPs to enter parliament, claiming that the GOL-managed elections, like Siniora's cabinet itself, were illegitimate. Berri may figure that, with one MP denied from each side, he can remain true to his Syrian-designed "conviction" that the Siniora cabinet is unconstitutional, without being accused of changing the parliamentary balance. So far, this all sounds like a reasonable forecast of Berri's behavior. It is Aoun's rumored course of action that is curious: having proven his point that his candidate can win elections, Aoun is now supposedly mulling over beating Berri to the punch, by having Camille Khoury refuse to accept his parliamentary seat. According to this rumor, Khoury will refuse to serve because of the illegality of the elections managed by an illegal cabinet. Had Aoun swept to an overwhelming victory, that strategy, however perverse, might make some sense. But, since Khoury barely squeaked to victory and lost the Maronite vote in the process, Aoun would probably appear foolish to

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move in this direction.  
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